

# Auschwitz, Buchenwald and Alfred Hitchcock's First Horror Movie

From the Memoirs of a German Soldier

[Nemo Anonymous](#)

## 1. Auschwitz-Birkenau as Seen through the Eyes of a Recuperating Trooper

I was a tank soldier, a member of a unit consisting of 70 Panther tanks which was pulled out of the Normandy invasion-opposition front and transferred to the Eastern front in mid-June 1944. By countless attacks by day and by night, we broke the enemy ring around Vilna and halted the advance of the Red Army against East Prussia. We also saw action in the Narew and Weichsel salients, and in October of 1944 we repulsed the hordes of Russian tanks moving toward Warsaw. By the middle of November, my company consisted of a mere three tanks. At that time an armored unit moved into our sector of the front to which we were allowed to attach our three remaining *Panzers*.

For almost six months we were constantly engaged in combat, both day and night, fighting under the worst supply situation imaginable. More than half of my comrades were killed, and those still alive looked terrible. We were nothing but skin and bones, with deeply lined faces and pale waxy complexions, indescribably filthy and infested with lice. For months we had been wearing the same uniforms and underwear, completely soaked with oil and sweat. The relentless overexertion had visibly frayed the nerves of many of my comrades. We were thankful to have survived the countless battles and overjoyed when we got the prospect of a little recuperation with a chance to catch up on our sleep. We left our section of the front and were transported by truck to the concentration camp at Birkenau. Approaching our destination, we saw columns of concentration-camp laborers wearing brown uniforms and engaged in constructing fallback defensive positions. Toward evening we arrived at Camp Birkenau.



*Ostfront-Süd, Panzer V "Panther" Ausf. A.; PK 695*

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The camp seemed to have been mostly evacuated, administered by the "Todt" Organization (major construction firm) using a large number of convicts. In addition to us, there were several other small groups from dissolved front-line units in camp. We three tank crews were assigned a barracks but not yet allowed to enter it. Four prisoners were assigned to us as orderlies; they led us to the shower installations. Our uniforms, underwear and blankets had to be deloused. The orderlies were horrified at the sight of our filthy rags. After bathing we were dusted with delousing powder and issued new underwear and overalls, along with two new blankets each. Finally we were allowed to enter our barracks; then we went to the mess hall to eat. After six months, finally getting a good hot meal, two warm blankets and being allowed to sleep in a bed, seemed too good to be true. After two days we got our cleaned and deloused uniforms back.

Several days later an SS sergeant approached us and requested that we take charge of supplies for his armored unit and deliver them to the front. We were to go to Auschwitz and pick up submachine guns, ammunition, smoke signal devices, blankets and other items for the combat squadron of our SS *Panzer* comrades. We drove there next day, but some of the items were not in stock and so we had to wait several days. We were quartered in the transit barracks. Every day we went to the warehouse with our requisition forms until finally we had everything on the list.

Included on the list were 50 blankets, which were stored in a building two stories high. This building had a central passageway with four tiers of wooden shelves on the right and left, part of which were filled with blankets. When I entered the building I could not see anyone but I heard voices coming from behind the bales of blankets. When I announced myself with a loud "hallo!" someone up above asked what I wanted. I replied that I wanted 50 blankets whereupon the unseen voice told me to count out fifty and take them away. When I replied that this was their job, four dark figures climbed down from the top bales of blankets, where they had been playing cards. Then they very ceremoniously counted out 50 blankets and loaded them onto our lorry while offering to sell us foreign cigarettes, chewing gum, cookies and wrist watches. The prisoners explained that they were allowed to receive Red Cross packages every month, and the camp was regularly inspected by the Red Cross.

On another occasion I observed six loafing prisoners pushing a small cart containing two bales of hair from the railroad dock to the camp. (During the War, barbers were required to collect human hair and turn it in, since hair was a raw material for the manufacture of felt boots.) I became really angry as I watched the lazy tempo of these prisoners, goofing off and smoking cigarettes. After all, I had just spent six months in constant combat, day and night, under the most severe exertion and deprivation imaginable. Half of my comrades had been killed while these jailbirds were having an easy time of it. This seemed unjust, incomprehensible! My comrades, filled with indignation, expressed the same sentiments.

After three days we finally received all the requested material and drove to the front with our supplies. I had the impression that Auschwitz was a huge supply depot for the Eastern Front, with additional buildings used for production and repair. While there we spoke with a large number of prisoners, but no one mentioned anything about gassings or cremations. We departed Auschwitz with the disquieting

impression that the prisoners there had a much easier time of it than the front-line soldiers in their daily duty.

## **2. A Train of Cattle Cars near Buchenwald**

On June 6, 1945 I was released by the Americans and transported from the POW camp near Hof to Weimar, which I had designated as my home. I spent several days with the family of a comrade named Rauf, who had been a radio operator in my last tank crew. Since I was a native of East Prussia and could not return home, I was hoping to find work and lodging with a master craftsman.

During the day Weimar was populated by concentration-camp inmates from Buchenwald, who were identified by a red triangle on their clothing. I conversed with a large number of them, and they were in good physical condition. During the day they participated in political studies for several hours, returning to camp by 10 o'clock. They were waiting for their official release papers so that they could file claims for compensation. Among others, I met the orderly of Ernst Thälmann, whose official duties had been to wait on the Communist leader. He described how Thälmann had been killed next to the railroad tracks during an air raid. The official version was that the Nazis had murdered him. The orderly complained that the political prisoners had too many special privileges and were not required to work.

Since I was well supplied with American cigarettes I went into the Buchenwald camp several times in order to exchange them for underwear, shirts and socks.

After a few days an inmate told me that the wife of the last commandant, a pretty blonde woman, had been raped countless times, all day long, by the American guard detachment. When she lodged a complaint, someone started the rumor that she had lampshades made from human skin. Other inmates disputed the story, describing it as disgusting atrocity propaganda invented to cover the crimes of her guards.

The streets of Weimar were patrolled by German auxiliary police appointed by the Americans. They wore Wehrmacht uniforms that had been dyed blue and they carried wooden clubs on their belts. I recognized one of these policemen as a resident of my home town who had been convicted of raping little girls. But when I greeted him as a hometown acquaintance, he denied being from there and pretended not to know me. I looked for work everywhere in Weimar without success, so I decided to go to Erfurt in search of employment. I also wanted to visit relatives there.

On a sunny day in mid-June 1945, I hopped on a freight train and went to Erfurt. The train stopped about a kilometer and a half before the station, so I shouldered my rucksack and began walking toward the station. I soon noticed a freight train of about 20 cattle cars sitting on a side track. A bad odor was coming from that direction. As I came closer I saw hands protruding from ventilation holes and heard sounds of moaning, so I crossed several tracks and approached the cattle cars. The people inside noticed me and began crying "Water, comrade, water!" Then I reached the train and recognized the terrible stench of feces and rotting corpses. The sliding doors and ventilation holes were crisscrossed with barbed wire securely nailed. Urine and partially dried feces oozed from under the sliding doors and between the boards.



*Alfred Hitchcock was persuaded by Sidney Bernstein to leave Hollywood to assist on project "F3080." F3080 was the name given to a project to compile a documentary film on German atrocities. The project originated in February 1945 in the Psychological Warfare Division of SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force). Hitchcock was recorded expressing his primary concern that "we should try to prevent people thinking that any of this was faked."*

*By Studio publicity still. Connormah at en.wikipedia [Public domain], from Wikimedia Commons*

I experienced a feeling of helplessness in a completely unexpected situation. In vain I looked about for a water hydrant used to fill the locomotive boilers. In the cattle cars they continued crying for water and saying that there were many corpses inside, people who had been dead for many days. I felt I had to do something but I was completely helpless. I took a few green apples from my knapsack, stuck them in my uniform jacket, and climbed up to a ventilation hole so that I could push them through the barbed wire. Suddenly an American guard began yelling and yanked me down from the cattle car. Another guard came and began jabbing me with his bayonet. Both guards hustled me out through the station entrance, where they let me go. I spent that night in a burned out lorry with another released Wehrmacht soldier, whom I told about our comrades in the cattle cars. Hoping to free the prisoners with an iron bar, we crept over to the rail yard, but our mission was impossible since the train was guarded by doubled sentries with dogs.

### **3. Hitchcock: The Great Simplifier**

In 1977, during a visit to New York and Cape May, I recounted the story of the trainload of dying German prisoners to two former US officers. They had both been stationed in Heidelberg shortly after the war and they knew all about it. They agreed that the cattle cars were filled with captured German soldiers who were infected with typhus and dysentery. They were in fact unwitting extras in a movie being made by Alfred Hitchcock, the Hollywood horror-film specialist. He had been awarded a contract to make a movie about concentration camps for the Nuremberg tribunal. At night the dead prisoners would be unloaded at Buchenwald, Dachau and other concentration camps by those who were still alive. Hitchcock would then film them, depicting the heaps of corpses as victims of German atrocities. A large number of corpses were dumped at Buchenwald at night, and next day the citizens of Weimar were forced to walk past the heaps of rotting corpses and smell the sickening stench. Some of them actually believed the American propaganda, that the corpses had been concentration-camp inmates. It was all filmed as part of Hitchcock's movie. Afterwards the corpses were shoved into mass graves in the vicinity. That too was part of the script. This is the explanation that the two former officers of the US Army gave me concerning the trainload of dying German prisoners that I witnessed on June 16, 1945.

I certify that my testimony is a true account of what I myself have personally seen and experienced.

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[The name and address of the US officer has been removed for his privacy and safety. The name and address of the author is on file with *Vrij Historisch Onderzoek*. Ed.]

Translated by James M. Damon.

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